

NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

by George Vukelich

My father always said that if you lived through a north country winter then you had darn well earned the right to loaf a little and enjoy the spring. I think the older you get, the harder it becomes to live through a winter, and there comes a day when you are just plain so sick of winter that one more grey, below-zero day will simply unhinge you. Fortunately, that desperate hour is usually followed by a blindingly sunny day; windless, warm, and full of promise. It's downright intoxicating. That same sun that thaws out the southern slopes will warm your bones like a fire; but more important, it warms the heart.

This is the kind of day to put on the snowshoes and walk the Chain of Lakes country. Past the littered man-made deeryard where Warden Windy Olson and Ranger Dick Smith trucked in the salt blocks and tons of alfalfa to help the starving herd. Through the stumpy burned-out area where the berries will grow in a ten-acre tangle next summer and ripen thick as your thumb. Along the frozen sloughs of Big Stone, where the spawning walleyes will lie like cordwood when the ice is gone. It has been a hard winter.

The deep snow cover on the pot-hole lake called Spring insures a heavy winterkill there. The snow shuts out the sunlight, and without sunlight the plankton does not flourish. Without plankton, the oxygen in the water below will not be replenished, and without oxygen, many, many fish will die. Walk respectfully over this locked-in grave. Not too many months from now, this will be clean, open water without a sign of winter. Then you can anchor the flat-bottom right here and work the flyrod toward shore for the fat, dark bluegills that, along with you, made it through the winter.

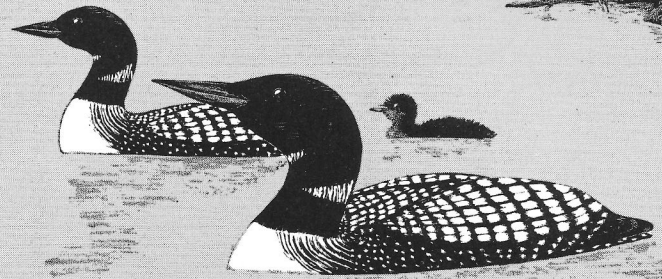
Oh, there will be fireplaces to clean, windows to wash, and screens to put up. But there will also be flocks of Canadas moving north for days on end. There will be skunk cabbage pushing up in the barely melted spots. And the frozen lakes will be creaking and cracking and showing open water in the channel below the Blue Ribbon Bridge. The winds will switch around to the south and everything will look and smell and be so fresh and new that you could cry. I envy the folks who miss our whole north country winter. But I feel sorry for those same folks when they miss our spring — and that blindingly sunny day.

Robert Frost, who, I think, would have felt right at home in our north country, once said about poetry: "If it's got *something*, you'll know it when you come back to it. If it hasn't got *something*, you'll find it's gone empty — gone ridiculous." Here, for Robert Frost, are a couple of poems written in the last days of our winter. I hope that if you ever come back to them, they haven't "gone ridiculous."

THIS WINTER, THE HAWKS

*This winter, the hawks come near the house.
The buried sleet fields hide even the mouse.
Starving hawks, with bellies to fill,
are thick hereabouts, thinning the grouse.*

*This morning from my window sill,
I watch the redtail with a chill.
Two chatterfool squirrels far below,
have marked themselves surely for the kill.*



*The hawk must think where they might go.
He takes their oak and they have the snow.
Now it makes no difference where they flee,
He drops as an arrow from a double-bent bow.*

*Death is coming from their tree.
This has been their history.
One will die and one go free.
I watch one die and one go free.*

This next one was written for all the old north country men, but in particular for my father. It could be for your father too.

THE MAN ON SNOWSHOES

*Upon the frozen chain of lakes,
the wolf tracks fill with silent flakes
two looping sets in the easy gait
of dogs at play and chasing stakes.*

*It is the one he has come to hate.
The grey hamstringer and his mate.
(Not the same she as last year.
She met death at the barnyard gate.)*

*Here, they stopped and stood to hear
the man on snowshoes far arear.
Now wolves again, the strides grow long.
The track draws straight, and does not veer.*

*God, to be young and fresh and strong.
It takes a young buck to follow along.
He turns and hears the old wolf's song.
A mile ahead, the old wolf's song.*

On the threshold of this new spring, I think it's only fitting to mention a north country woman who lived to see 84 north country springs. Grandma Harrison, living alone long after her husband was buried and her family grown and scattered, typifies the spirit of the north for me. I remember the birthday, the last she was to have, when she reached 84. She said she was pretty lonely now and that was the one thing she didn't like about being 84.

"It wasn't so bad when I had Bob," she said. "But you couldn't expect Bob to live forever."

Bob was a purebred springer spaniel given to her as a pup by one of her sons, and the dog lived with Grandma for 13 years.

"Bob went everywhere I went and he minded a lot better than most kids in town. Folks couldn't get over the way Bob minded and when they asked me how I got him to mind I told them it was simple. I told them that if Bob wouldn't have minded me I would have killed him and I guess he understood that."

Spring is here, my friend. We made it and Robert Frost and Grandma Harrison and a lot of the others didn't make it. Enjoy this spring for them.